



Washington Suburban Sanitary Commission:

Public Meeting Project

RMP Network is designed to share successful practices in RMP implementation, risk communication, and use of the data. The projects detailed in RMP Network are easily reproducible, low cost and promote partnership-building in the community. This fact sheet does not provide extensive information about a project. Rather, it is intended to help stakeholders generate ideas, identify tools and pinpoint funding sources for accident preparedness and prevention initiatives.

Purpose

The Washington Suburban Sanitary Commission manages two water filtration plants and three wastewater treatment plants in the Washington, D.C., metropolitan area that submitted a Risk Management Plan under section 112(r) of the Clean Air Act by the June 21, 1999, deadline. New requirements of the Chemical Safety Information, Site Security and Fuels Regulatory Relief Act required the plants to hold a public meeting by Feb. 1, 2000, to discuss the implications of their RMPs, including the local implications of the Off-Site Consequence analyses. The Commission's Communications Office led the effort to hold public meetings at all five facilities.

Challenges

The team had to work with top level management and engineers to:

- Open plant doors and let the public see first hand how safe facility operations are;
- Gain buy in to take a straight-forward approach to discussing worst-case scenarios;
- Develop plain language presentations of worst-case scenario information; and
- Help them understand how much public disclosure was allowed under the new law.

Public Notice

WSSC did extensive outreach to the 1.6 million people in their service area:

- Elected officials were briefed prior to the public meetings;

- Notices were posted on the Commission's website and published in local newspapers for two consecutive weeks prior to the meeting;
- Plant managers placed flyers announcing the meeting in local stores; and
- Civic leaders received invitations.

Meeting Sites

The meetings were held from 7:00 to 9:00 p.m. to encourage attendance. Hosting the meetings at the plant site allowed the public to take a quick tour of the plant and see the safety measures that were in place. Refreshments were served to allow time for informal conversations with plant employees.

Lessons Learned

Of the five meetings, only one was fairly well attended. Plant officials concluded that residents were ambivalent about the Risk Management Plans because the facilities had a good safety record. Good community relations had been forged previously through annual Open Houses. Inviting the local fire chief to attend the public meeting helps calm any possible fears as the fire chief can answer questions about evacuation procedures.

Cost vs. Benefit

Approximately \$10,000 per facility was spent on the briefings of elected officials, a focus group meeting, and the public meeting. A consultant was hired to help prepare the presentation, develop a brochure and advertisements for local papers. Benefits were increased credibility with local officials and employee interaction. One facility will host a training for local volunteer firefighters after learning that the unit lacked money for chlorine safety training. The greatest benefit was pulling employees from safety, engineering, and communications to work as a team. The team forged new relationships and increased understanding of a variety of viewpoints. Plant personnel, who rarely get a chance to speak with the public, had an opportunity to learn a new skill, and in every instance, it was their presentation that made the greatest impression on the audience.

Next Steps

WSSC will continue to nurture the newly formed relationships within the Commission, the public and elected officials through continued dialogue.

For more information, contact ...

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